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# HAÏTI AND THE UNITED STATES.

## INSIDE HISTORY OF THE NEGOTIATIONS FOR THE MÔLE ST. NICOLAS.

BY THE HON. FREDERICK DOUGLASS, LATE UNITED STATES MINISTER TO HAÏTI.

### II.

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AT A meeting subsequent to the one already described, application for a United States naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas was made in due form to Mr. Firmin, the Haïtien Minister of Foreign Affairs. At his request, as already stated, this application was presented to him in writing. The paper containing it is somewhat remarkable. It was prepared on board of the "Philadelphia," the flagship of Rear-Admiral Bancroft Gherardi, and bore his signature alone. I neither signed it nor was asked to sign it, although it met my entire approval. I make this statement not in the way of a complaint or grievance, but simply to show what, at that time, was my part, and what was not my part, in this important negotiation, the failure of which has been unjustly laid to my charge. Had the Môle been then acquired, in response to this paper, the credit of success, according to the record, would have properly belonged to the gallant admiral in whose name it was demanded, for in it I had neither part nor lot.

At this point, curiously enough, and unfortunately for the negotiations, the Haïtien Minister, who is an able man and well skilled in the technicalities of diplomacy, asked to see the commission of Admiral Gherardi and to read his letter of instructions. When these were presented to Mr. Firmin, he, after carefully reading them, pronounced them insufficient, and held that by them the government of the United States would not be bound by any convention which Haïti might make with the admiral. This position of Mr. Firmin's was earnestly and stoutly opposed by

Admiral Gherardi, who insisted that his instructions were full, complete, and amply sufficient. Unfortunately, however, he did not leave the matter in controversy without intimating that he thought that Mr. Firmin might be insincere in raising such an objection, and that he was urging it simply with a view to cause unnecessary delay. This was more like the blunt admiral than the discreet diplomat. Such an imputation was obviously out of place, and not likely to smooth the way to a successful proceeding, but quite the reverse. Mr. Firmin insisted that his ground was well and honestly taken.

Here, therefore, the negotiation was brought to a sudden halt, and the question for us then was, What shall be done next? Three ways were open to us. First, to continue to insist upon the completeness of the authority of Admiral Gherardi; second, to abandon the scheme of a naval station altogether; third, to apply to the government at Washington for the required letter of credence. It was my opinion that it was hardly worth while to continue to insist upon the sufficiency of the admiral's papers, since it seemed useless to contend about mere technicalities; more especially as we were now in telegraphic connection with the United States, and could in the course of a few days easily obtain the proper and required papers.

Besides, I held that a prompt compliance with the demand of the Haitien Government for a perfect letter of credence would be not only the easiest way out of the difficulty, but the wisest policy by which to accomplish the end we sought, since such compliance on our part with even what might fairly be considered an unreasonable demand would make refusal by Haiti to grant the Môle all the more difficult.

I did not understand Admiral Gherardi to combat this opinion of mine, for he at once acted upon it, and caused an officer from his flagship to go with me to my house and prepare a telegram to be sent to Washington for the required letter of credence. To this telegram he, two days thereafter, received answer that such a letter would be immediately sent by a Clyde steamer to Gonaïves, and thither the admiral went to receive his expected letter. But, from some unexplained cause, no such letter came by the Clyde steamer at the time appointed, and two months intervened before the desired credentials arrived. This unexpected delay proved to be very mischievous and unfavorable to our getting the

Môle, since it gave rise among the Haïtien people to much speculation and many disquieting rumors prejudicial to the project. It was said that Admiral Gherardi had left Port au Prince in anger, and had gone to take possession of the Môle without further parley; that the American flag was already floating over our new naval station; that the United States wanted the Môle as an entering wedge to obtaining possession of the whole island; with much else of like inflammatory nature. Although there was no truth in all this, it had the unhappy effect among the masses of stirring up suspicion and angry feelings towards the United States, and of making it more difficult than it might otherwise have been for the government of Haïti to grant the required concession.

Finally, after this long interval of waiting, during which the flagship of Admiral Gherardi was reported at different points, sometimes at Gonaïves, sometimes at the Môle, and sometimes at Kingston, Jamaica, the required letter of credence arrived. The next day I was again summoned on board the "Philadelphia," and there was shown me a paper, signed by the President of the United States and by the Secretary of State, authorizing myself, as minister resident to Haïti, and Rear-Admiral Gherardi, as special commissioner, to negotiate with such persons as Haïti might appoint for the purpose of concluding a convention by which we should obtain a lease of the Môle St. Nicolas as a United States naval station.

It may here be remarked that the letter of credence signed by President Harrison and by the Secretary of State differed in two respects from the former and rejected letter under which we had previously acted. First, it charged me, equally with Admiral Gherardi, with the duty of negotiation; and secondly, it was an application for a naval station pure and simple, without limitations and without conditions.

Before presenting to Haïti this new letter, which had the advantage of being free from the conditions specified in the old one, the question arose between the admiral and myself as to whether or not we should begin our new negotiations, under our new commission, separate and entirely apart from all that had been attempted under the instructions contained in the old letter. On this point I differed with the admiral. I took the position that we should ignore the past altogether, and proceed according to

the instructions of the new letter alone, unincumbered by any terms or limitations contained in the old letter. I felt sure that there were features in the conditions of the old letter which would be met by the representatives of Haïti with strong objections. But the admiral and his able lieutenant insisted that the present letter did not exclude the conditions of the old one, but was, in its nature, only supplementary to them, and hence that this was simply a continuation of what had gone before. It was therefore decided to proceed with the negotiations on the basis of both the old and the new letter. Under the former letter of instructions our terms were precise and explicit; under the latter we were left largely to our own discretion: we were simply to secure from the government of Haïti a lease of the Môle St. Nicolas for a naval station.

The result is known. Haïti refused to grant the lease, and alleged that to do so was impossible under the hard terms imposed in the previous letter of instructions. I do not know that our government would have accepted a naval station from Haïti upon any other or less stringent terms or conditions than those exacted in our first letter of instructions; but I do know that the main grounds alleged by Haïti for its refusal were the conditions set forth in this first letter of instructions, one of which is expressed as follows: "That so long as the United States may be the lessee of the Môle St. Nicolas, the government of Haïti will not lease or otherwise dispose of any port or harbor or other territory in its dominions, or grant any special privileges or rights of use therein, to any other power, state, or government." This was not only a comprehensive limitation of the power of Haïti over her own territory, but a denial to all others of that which we claimed for ourselves.

But no one cause fully explains our failure to get a naval station at the Môle. One fundamental element in our non-success was found, not in any aversion to the United States or in any indifference on my part, as has been often charged, but in the government of Haïti itself. It was evidently timid. With every disposition to oblige us, it had not the courage to defy the well-known, deeply-rooted, and easily-excited prejudices and traditions of the Haïtien people. Nothing is more repugnant to the thoughts and feelings of the masses of that country than the alienation of a single rood of their territory to a foreign power.

This sentiment originated, very naturally, in the circumstances in which Haïti began her national existence. The whole Christian world was at that time against her. The Caribbean Sea was studded with communities hostile to her. They were slaveholding. She, by her bravery and her blood, was free. Her existence was, therefore, a menace to them, and theirs was a menace to her. France, England, Spain, Portugal, and Holland, as well as the United States, were wedded to the slave system which Haïti had, by arms, thrown off; and hence she was regarded as an outcast, and was outlawed by the Christian world. Though time and events have gone far to change this relation of hers to the outside world, the sentiment that originated in the beginning of her existence continues, on both sides, until this day. It was this that stood like a wall of granite against our success. Other causes co-operated, but this was the principal cause. Of course our peculiar and intense prejudice against the colored race was not forgotten. Our contrast to other nations, in this respect, is often dwelt upon in Haïti to our disadvantage. In no part of Europe will a Haïtien be insulted because of his color, and Haïtiens well know that this is not the case in the United States.

Another influence unfavorable to our obtaining the coveted naval station at the Môle was the tone of the New York press on the subject. It more than hinted that, once in possession of the Môle, the United States would control the destiny of Haïti. Torn and rent by revolution as she has been and still is, Haïti yet has a large share of national pride, and scorns the idea that she needs, or will submit to, the rule of a foreign power. Some of her citizens would doubtless be glad of American rule, but the overwhelming majority would burn their towns and freely shed their blood over their ashes to prevent such a consummation.

Not the least, perhaps, among the collateral causes of our non-success was the minatory attitude assumed by us while conducting the negotiation. What wisdom was there in confronting Haïti at such a moment with a squadron of large ships of war with a hundred cannon and two thousand men? This was done, and it was naturally construed into a hint to Haïti that if we could not, by appeals to reason and friendly feeling, obtain what we wanted, we could obtain it by a show of force. We appeared before the Haïtiens, and before the world, with the pen in one hand and the sword in the other. This was not a friendly and con-

siderate attitude for a great government like ours to assume when asking a concession from a small and weak nation like Haïti. It was ill timed, and out of all proportion to the demands of the occasion. It was also done under a total misapprehension of the character of the people with whom we had to deal. We should have known that, whatever else the Haïtien people may be, they are not cowards, and hence are not easily scared.

In the face of all these obvious and effective causes of failure, is it not strange that our intelligent editors and our nautical newspaper writers could not have found for the American Government and people a more rational cause for the failure of the negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas than that of my color, indifference, and incompetency to deal with a question of such magnitude? Were I disposed to exchange the position of accused for that of accuser, I could find ample material to sustain me in that position. Other persons did much to create conditions unfavorable to our success, but I leave to their friends the employment of such personal assaults.

On the theory that I was the cause of this failure, we must assume that Haïti was willing to grant the Môle; that the timidity of the Haïtien Government was all right; that the American prejudice was all right; that the seven ships of war in the harbor of Port au Prince were all right; that Rear-Admiral Gherardi was all right, and that I alone was all wrong; and, moreover, that but for me the Môle St. Nicolas, like an over-ripe apple shaken by the wind, would have dropped softly into our national basket. I will not enlarge upon this absurd assumption, but will leave the bare statement of it to the intelligent reader, that it may perish by its flagrant contradiction of well-known facts and by its own absurdity.

I come now to another cause of complaint against me, scarcely less serious in the minds of those who now assail me than the charge of having defeated the lease of the Môle St. Nicolas; namely, the failure of what is publicly known as the Clyde contract. Soon after my arrival in Haïti I was put in communication with an individual calling himself the agent of the highly respectable mercantile firm of William P. Clyde & Co., of New York. He was endeavoring to obtain a subsidy of a half-million dollars from the government of Haïti to enable this firm to ply a line of steamers between New York and Haïti. From the first

this agent assumed toward me a dictatorial attitude. He claimed to be a native of South Carolina, and it was impossible for him to conceal his contempt for the people whose good will it was his duty to seek. Between this agent and the United States Government I found myself somewhat in the position of a servant between two masters : either one of them, separately and apart, might be served acceptably ; but to serve both satisfactorily at the same time and place might be a difficult task, if not an impossible one. There were times when I was compelled to prefer the requirements of the one to the ardent wishes of the other, and I thought as between this agent and the United States I should choose to serve the latter.

The trouble between us came about in this way : Mr. Firmin, the Haïtien Minister of Foreign Affairs, had objected to granting the Clyde concession on the ground that, if it were granted and this heavy drain were made upon the treasury of his country, Mr. Douglass stood ready to present and to press upon Haïti the payment of the claims of many other American citizens, and that this would greatly embarrass the newly-organized government of President Hyppolite. In view of this objection, the zealous agent in question came to me and proposed that I should go to Mr. Firmin, in my quality of minister resident and consul-general of the United States, and assure him that, if he would only grant the Clyde concession, I, on my part, would withhold and refrain from pressing the claims of other American citizens.

The proposition shocked me. It sounded like the words of Satan on the mountain, and I thought it time to call a halt. I was in favor of the Clyde contract, but I could not see what I had said or done to make it possible for any man to make to me a proposal so plainly dishonest and scandalous. I refused to do any such thing. Here was my first offence, and it at once stamped me as an unprofitable servant. It did not seem to occur to this agent that he had made to me a shameful, dishonest, and shocking proposition. Blinded by zeal or by an influence still more misleading, he seemed to see in it only an innocent proposal. He thereafter looked upon me as an unworthy ally, and duly reported me as such to his master and to other influential persons. He could not understand my conduct as proceeding from other or better motives than that of over-affection for the Haïtiens. In his eyes I was, from that time, more a Haïtien than an



American, and I soon saw myself so characterized in American journals.

The refusal to compromise and postpone the just claims of other American citizens for that of his master's contract was not, however, my only offence. On obtaining a leave of absence from my post, in July, 1890, I, of course, as was my duty, called upon President Hyppolite before my departure for the purpose of paying to him my respects. This agent at once sought me and desired me to make use of this visit of mere ceremony as an occasion to press anew the Clyde contract upon the attention of the President. This I could not properly do, especially as I had on previous occasions repeatedly urged its consideration upon him. The President already knew well enough my sense of the importance to Haïti of this measure, not only as a means of enlarging her commerce and of promoting her civilization, but also as a guarantee of the stability of her government. Nevertheless, my refusal to urge in so unbecoming a manner a demand already repeatedly urged upon the attention of the Haïtien Government was made use of by this agent, to my injury, both at the State Department and with Mr. Clyde's firm. I was reported at Washington and to various persons in high places as unfriendly to this concession.

When at last it appeared to the agent that the government of Haïti was, as he thought, stubbornly blind to its own interests, and that it would not grant the contract in question, he called at the United States legation and expressed to me his disappointment and disgust at the delay of Haïti in accepting his scheme. He said he did not believe that the government really intended to do anything for his firm; that he himself had spent much time and money in promoting the concession; and as he did not think that Mr. Clyde ought to be made to pay for the time thus lost and the expense incurred by the delay and dallying of the Haïtien Government, he should therefore demand his pay of Haïti. This determination struck me as very odd, and I jocosely replied:

"Then, sir, as they will not allow you to put a hot poker down their backs, you mean to make them pay you for heating it!"

This rejoinder was my final destruction in the esteem of this zealous advocate. He saw at once that he could not count upon

my assistance in making this new demand. I was both surprised at his proposal and amused by it, and wondered that he could think it possible to get this pay. It seemed to me that Haïti would scout the idea at once. She had not sent for him. She had not asked him to stay. He was there for purposes of his own, and not for any purpose of hers. I could not see why Haïti should pay him for coming, going, or staying. But this gentleman knew better than I the generous character of the people with whom he had to deal, and he followed them up till they actually paid him \$5,000 in gold.

But compliance with his demand proved a woful mistake on the part of Haïti, and, in fact, nonsense. This man, after getting his money, went away, but he did not stay away. He was soon back again to press his scheme with renewed vigor. His demands were now to be complied with or he would make, not Rome, but Haïti, howl. To him it was nothing that Haïti was already wasted by repeated revolutions; nothing that she was already staggering under the weight of a heavy national debt; nothing that she herself ought to be the best judge of her ability to pour out a half-million of dollars in this new and, to her, doubtful enterprise; nothing that she had heard his arguments in its favor a hundred times over; nothing that, in her judgment, she had far more pressing needs for her money than the proposed investment in this steamship subsidy, as recommended by him; nothing that she had told him plainly that she was afraid to add to her pecuniary burdens this new and onerous one; and nothing that she had just paid him \$5,000 in gold to get rid of his importunities.

Now, while I was in favor of Haïti's granting the subsidy asked for in the name of Clyde & Co., and thought it would be in many ways a good thing for Haïti to have the proposed line of steamers for which a subsidy was asked, I had, and I now have, nothing but disgust for the method by which this scheme was pressed upon Haïti.

I must say in conclusion that, while, as already intimated, it does not appear certain that Haïti would have leased us the Môle on any conditions whatever, it is certain that the application for it was ill timed in more respects than one. It was especially unfortunate for us that the Clyde concession was applied for in advance of our application for a lease of the Môle. Whatever

else may be said of the Haïtiens, this is true of them they are quick to detect a fault and to distinguish a trick from an honest proceeding. To them the preference given to the interests of an individual firm over those of the United States seemed to wear a sinister aspect. In the opinion of many intelligent persons in Haïti, had a lease of the Môle been asked for in advance of the concession to Mr. Clyde, the application for it might have been successful. This, however, is not my opinion. I do not now think that any earthly power outside of absolute force could have gotten for us a naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas. Still, to all appearances, the conditions of success were more favorable before than after the Clyde contract was urged upon Haïti. Prior to this the country, weary of war, was at peace. Ambitious leaders had not begun openly to conspire. The government under Hyppolite was newly organized. Confidence in its stability was unimpaired. It was, naturally enough, reaching out its hand to us for friendly recognition. Our good offices during the war were fresh in its memory. France, England, and Germany were not ready to give it recognition. In fact, all the conditions conspired to influence Haïti to listen to our request for a coaling-station at the Môle St. Nicolas. But instead of a proposition for a much-needed coaling-station at the Môle St. Nicolas, there was presented one for a subsidy to an individual steamship company. All must see that the effect of this was calculated to weaken our higher claim, and to place us at a disadvantage before Haïti and before all the world.

And now, since the American people have been made thoroughly acquainted with one view of this question, I know of no interest which will suffer and no just obligation which will be impaired by the presentation of such facts as I have here submitted to the public judgment. If in this my course is thought to be unusual, it should be remembered that the course pursued toward me by the press has been unusual, and that they who had no censure for the latter should have none for the former.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS.